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PR 670 An Introduction to the History of Christian Preaching

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PR670: An Introduction to the History of Christian Preaching

The course will be offered for three (3) hours of course credit. It will be a 600 level course, cross-listed as PR/CH. Prerequisites are PR610 and CH 1&2.

The course will be conducted in a seminar format with a limit of 16 students.

Students will be expected to demonstrate competence both knowledge and practical wisdom for contemporary practice through guided reading, research and reflection in the homiletic tradition.

Required Textbooks: Robert Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christianity*, Michael Pasquarello, *Sacred Rhetoric: Preaching as a Theological and Pastoral Practice of the Church*, Simon Tugwell, *The First Dominicans*, Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and Desire for God*, T.H.L. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*. In addition, students are encouraged to consult, *The Reading and Preaching of Scripture in the Worship of the Christian Church* Vols. I-V, *The Biblical, Patristic, Medieval, Reformation and Early Modern Periods* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999-2005). Each student will also be required to research selected sermons from the tradition for discussion in class and the final paper.

Students will be required to read primary and secondary sources that will introduce them to the preaching tradition from the Patristic through the Reformation periods. *We will pay particular attention to Irenaeus, Augustine, Gregory the Great, Benedict, Bernard of Clairvaux, Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, Erasmus, Hugh Latimer, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Wesley.* Readings will be discussed during each class session, with students rotating responsibility for providing response and reflection to demonstrate historical and homiletic understanding of the material. A final reflection paper (15-20 pages) and presentation on a particular preacher will be required. The paper will describe and evaluate the homiletic (theological and pastoral) wisdom displayed in sermons and related material within the preacher's historical context in order to bring these discoveries into conversation with contemporary homiletic practice.

(3.2) **An Introduction to the History of Christian Preaching** will contribute to the curriculum in several ways. First, the course will increase students' understanding of the preaching tradition by introducing them to the homiletic wisdom of exemplars from the past. Second, the course will encourage students to increase their understanding of the Christian tradition as seen from the perspective of pastoral ministry. Third, the course will help students to integrate the significance of historical and homiletic study for the practice of preaching. Fourth, the course will serve as a means to encourage the necessary disciplines of prayer and study for faithful pastoral practice.

(3.3) The content and methodology of the course will be appropriate for the Departments of Preaching and Church History, since the study of homiletic practice will be conducted within the

larger ecclesial, historical, and social contexts. Preachers and sermons will be discussed in relation to doctrinal, exegetical, and pastoral developments across time. Students will be encouraged to recognize the role of preaching within the dialectic of continuity and change in the Christian tradition as a means of discernment for faithful practice in the future.

Course Description: An Introduction to the History of Preaching

“The story of the sermon and the hymns and of the processions and of the sacramental acts and of the readings is to be God’s story, the story of the Bible. Preachers are the greatest sinners here: the text already is and belongs to the one true story; it does not need to be helped out in this respect. What is said and enacted in the church must be with the greatest exactitude and faithfulness and exclusivity the story of creation and redemption by the God of Israel and Father of the Risen Christ.” (Robert Jenson, ‘How the World Lost Its Story.’)

The purpose of this course is to introduce seminarians to the practice of preaching as, both a theological discipline and a pastoral activity, a capacity that is a gift of the Holy Spirit by which the Risen Lord continues to speak to, in, and through his Church. Because the narrative of the Church’s faithful practitioners is its best advocate and argument, the focus of our study will be directed towards particular preachers, their sermons and *pastoralia* --- homiletic treatises and handbooks --- from the Christian tradition. This approach will position us to learn from the wisdom, insight and instruction of our predecessors concerning the central activity of proclaiming the Gospel to create, enliven, and sustain the Church to be a faithful people called to worship and to participate in the life of the Triune God.

We will read the works of faithful exemplars, beginning with the kerygmatic witness of Scripture --- the preaching of the Prophets, Apostles, and Christ --- concluding with sixteenth-century Reformers, to understand more clearly the manner in which our contemporary practice of preaching is grounded, given life, judged and shaped by this company of preachers who have preceded us. As the work of Alisdair MacIntyre has shown, our contemporary practices are embedded in traditions which provide outstanding examples of moral and intellectual excellence in the achievement of their respective purposes, offering means for self-criticism and self-correction, which may direct us in our attempts to go forward. The standards of achievement within a craft such as preaching are justified historically because they have emerged from the criticism of their predecessors and have succeeded in remedying their defects and overcoming their limitations as guides to excellent achievement. The authority of our acknowledged mentors and masters is more than exemplifying the best known standards known to date, more than improving relevant skills or techniques. It is also a matter of possessing practical knowledge, of knowing how, given the concrete requirements of particular occasions, to go farther and how to direct others towards going farther, discerning from what may be learned from the tradition afforded by the past to move towards the goal of more mature, faithful practice. We will therefore study their lives and works as the history of which we are a part and in which we share. This importance of personal and practical judgment that is shaped by wisdom gained through experience, was emphasized by John Henry Newman who wrote in the *Grammar of Assent*:

Instead of trusting logical science, we must trust persons, namely those who by long acquaintance with their subject have a right to judge. And if we wish ourselves to share in their convictions and the grounds of them, we must follow their history, and learn as they have learned. We must depend on practice and experience more than on reasoning.

The preachers studied in this course will be presented as reliable (although not perfect), and experienced examples and mentors in the “preaching life,” rather than as theorists of homiletic technique. We will study and discuss their lives and sermons in light of their primary role as pastors called by God to the practical tasks of forming and building up a Christian people, an identity nurtured and reinforced through the constant preaching of the Word of God in Scripture to enable the Church to discern and to obey its pattern of faith and life. While we will give consideration to shifts and changes in preaching rhetoric according to historical contexts --- noting the variety in its topics, themes, arrangement and style --- we will devote our primary attention to discerning continuities in the pastoral purpose of preaching and the manner in which changes served its constancy in the formation of Christian conviction, character, and community within the worship of the whole Church. With this important assumption in mind, we will read sermons that exemplify pastoral wisdom, looking to discern within them a practical vision of the Church ordered under the public proclamation of the Word of God as found in the people of Israel and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

By positioning ourselves within the homiletic tradition and entering into its extended conversation, we may hope to gain a vital and necessary understanding of preaching as a theological and ecclesial discipline requiring: 1) the practice of prayer and obedience; 2) the reading, study, and interpretation of Scripture; 3) the testing of exegesis by means of the Church’s theological convictions for faithful homiletic performance. Moreover, a personal and historical introduction of this nature may serve to edify and to encourage students to acquire and develop an ‘eye’ for the character and wisdom of pastoral vocation embodied in the practice of preaching: the attentiveness and insight required for faithfully calling the Church to know, to love, and to serve the Triune God whose speech authors its life and secures its future.

We will devote time during the first half of the course to the proclamatory nature of Scripture and the preaching and pastoral wisdom of the Church Fathers, since both Medieval and Reformation era preachers claimed to be faithful to the Biblical witness and Patristic models in extending the practice of preaching for the life of the Church in their care. We will also discuss selected letters, treatises, or handbooks on pastoral ministry and preaching that address the theological and moral resourcefulness required of pastors in close relation to the nature and task of preaching in the “midst of the Church.”

A primary objective is that students will come to see themselves as members of the Church’s company of preachers, so that the conditions for our conversation will encourage the discovery of a discourse through which the nature of preaching as a theological and pastoral practice may be examined, understood, articulated and defended. Students also will be encouraged to see themselves as responsible researchers and participants in the history of Christian practice rather than as consumers and users of skills and technique, as those called to possess the sort of Christian character required for preaching through self-involvement in the concrete forms of life, contingencies, and conditions of the Church under the Rule of God.

Class work will consist of discussing the assigned readings, as well as appropriate sermons or treatises, with emphasis being given to discerning the manner in which the preacher's life, biblical exegesis, theology, and homiletic design are integrated as a means of instructing, sustaining and strengthening the Church in a particular time and place. *Students will rotate responsibility for reporting on assigned readings.* A final project (15-20 pages) and presentation examining a particular preacher(s) from one of the historical periods covered in this course will be due at semester's end. The subject of the paper will be determined in conversation with the Professor and will reflect upon the practice of preaching as seen through the work and experience of the particular preacher(s) under consideration, demonstrating the student's progress towards fulfilling the goals of the course.